THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

TO HEAL THE SIN-SICK SOUL

February 21, 1999
John M. Buchanan

There are many routes to Easter, but none of them escapes the shadow of the cross, that point where our time and God's eternity converge; and at the center point where time and eternity meet is the Christ who makes it all possible. In the shadow of the cross we make our way, acknowledging who and what we are, sinners who stand in need of God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters. All this we know. We need to be reminded to remember it all the same; and Lent is an opportune time for that.

Peter Gomes
Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-13
Matthew 4:1-11

> Dear God, sometimes we think there is so much wrong with us and the world that we can't see what is good and right. Save us from the cynicism that demeans ourselves and gives up on the world. And save us also from superficial optimism that will not acknowledge our need, our shortcomings. Teach us, O God, to say the word sin again—in the context of your amazing grace, which overcomes everything and which welcomes us home as your children. In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

The phone call was from a friend with whom I had had several substantive conversations on matters of religion, politics—life in general. She's gone now, but I knew her well enough to be sure she wouldn't mind my telling you about her concern that day. "I need to talk to you," she said, "and it's about religion this time. That is your area of expertise, is it not?"

I said I'd be right over, and when I arrived at her apartment, she had a Fourth Church bulletin in her hand. Listen to this, she said as we sat down, and she began to read the Prayer of Confession from the Sunday service.

> ". . . we cling to the values of a broken world. The profit and pleasures we pursue lay waste the land and pollute the seas. The fears and jealousies that we harbor set neighbor against neighbor and nation against nation." (*Book of Common Worship*).

"Now, really, John," she said, sounding an awfully lot like my mother, "I didn't do all that last week. I didn't waste the land and pollute the seas and turn my neighbors against one another. I didn't have time for all that. I had a busy week: went shopping, saw a movie, came to church. Why do you make us say all those dreadful things week after week?"

She had other bulletins; it was obviously a persistent concern of hers: "We have walked away from neighbors in need . . . We condone evil, prejudice, warfare, and greed," was one that particularly irritated her. "I don't do that," she protested. So we did have a good conversation about why there is a prayer of confession and what we believe about sin. I don't think she was convinced.

The fact is that a central but somewhat awkward dimension of the Christian faith is the conviction that there is something wrong with the human condition; something wrong at the heart of things; something that needs to be acknowledged, confessed; something that needs to be put right, redeemed, reconciled, atoned for, covered over, forgiven; something in which everybody is involved; something that has a corporate as well as a personal dimension, so that, no, she didn't pollute the seas last week; but, yes, she and all the rest of us are part of enormous economic structures that most certainly are polluting the seas and air and rivers and cutting down rain forests and heating up the environment, and generally acting as if our comfort and affluence are all that matter; and if we leave behind us the largest gap between rich and poor, third world nations struggling with debt owed to us, and an ocean of red ink at home, well, our grandchildren will just have to deal with it. And, no, she didn't personally harm anyone, but all of us are part of a system that has allowed an unprecedented number of guns and semi-automatic and military-style weapons to be purchased and inevitably used to kill by intent or accident.

Something is wrong. It's what Christian faith is about. It's what Jesus Christ came for, and the daily newspaper is all the evidence we really need.

The late Reinhold Niebuhr observed, "The doctrine of original sin is the one empirically verifiable doctrine of Christian faith."

But it is not one we particularly like or are comfortable discussing. Modern, upbeat, positive-thinking Christians don't even like to say the word. Neil Plantinga, at Calvin Seminary, remembers the day when preachers would get red in the face and worked up about sin, Catholics lined up to confess their sins, our grandparents agonized over their sins. It is hard today to tell what we mean. "The new language of Zion fudges," he says. "The only place you see the word sin, in print, is on a dessert menu." Peanut Butter Binge and Chocolate Challenge are advertised as deliciously sinful. "The new measure for sin is caloric." (*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, Preface).

And Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace* pokes fun at our reticence to use clear language when it comes to this subject.

> "I am a sinner and the Presbyterian Church offers me a weekly chance to come clean. But pastors can be so reluctant to use the word 'sin' that in church we end up confessing nothing but our highly developed capacity for denial. One week the confession began, 'Our communication with Jesus tends to be too infrequent to experience the transformation in our lives which you want us to have,' which seems less a prayer than a memo from one professional to another. At such times, I picture God as a wily writing teacher who leans across a table and says, not at all gently, 'Could you possibly be troubled to say what you mean?' It would be refreshing to answer simply, 'I have sinned.'" (p. 165).

Well, what do we mean when we say that? What, in fact, is the problem? What does the Bible say?

One Old Testament scholar advises that you have to work very hard to listen and to hear what the Bible actually says about this matter. The reason is that the texts are overloaded with theological and moral baggage, much of which reflects the culture and time of the particular theologian more than the text. So, he advises, try to read and talk about these texts without the words and categories we ordinarily assign to them, "The Fall," or "Original Sin," for instance. Those words are not in the Genesis text, by the way. They are theological interpretations of the text.

What the text says is that human beings were created to live in a relationship of trust in the creator and confidence in the creator's structures and boundaries. Human beings are created to live together in peace and they have responsibilities for the care of the garden which is perfectly capable of providing for them. There is plenty to eat in the garden. It is paradise.

But something goes terribly wrong. Enter the serpent—not evil, not loathsome; just clever, crafty. The serpent only speaks twice, but, someone noted, they are the best lines in the whole play:

> "Did God say, you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?"
>
> and
>
> "You will not die."

Theologian Daniel Migliore says that the serpent, with those clever lines, effectively sabotages the relationship of trust between the creatures and the creator (*Faith Seeking Understanding*, p. 130). Peter Gomes thinks the devil knows a lot about human psychology and does some very clever marketing.

"Did God really say don't eat the fruit? You won't die?" So Eve bites and convinces Adam, who can't say no to Eve, and when he is caught he blames her and she blames the snake. They haven't done anything terrible; nobody is hurt, yet. That will happen soon enough. In fact, one of their sons will kill his brother. But now, they simply have stopped trusting God and living in faith and confidence in God's providence and love. And, they notice their nakedness. Surely they had noticed before. But now they are ashamed. The nakedness is not sinful—although for 2000 years the Church has been obsessed with the idea that sex and sexuality are really the problems here. What happens in the text, however, is the loss of innocence, the loss of childlike trust in the creator and the appearance of fear. Suspicion; jealousy, hatred, and violence won't be far behind. No one has ever come up with a better description of what is wrong with us and with the world and with human history than that.

The story of the temptations of Jesus, the traditional New Testament text for the first Sunday in Lent, is remarkably similar.

Jesus is led into the wilderness after his baptism for a time of testing, refining, prayer; a time to reflect on who he is and what is life will be. The Devil appears—crafty, not loathsome, but clever, smooth.

"If you are the Son of God . . .," he says, planting the same doubt as he did in the garden. "Did God really say . . . If you are the Son of God, turn stones into bread . . . You're hungry, eat . . . Jump off the Temple if you're God's Son. You'll survive; people will find you interesting. You could rule the world."

Peter Gomes says that the Devil knows exactly the most vulnerable places in the human spirit: "Hunger is nature's most devastating device. It can alter the personality, warp the judgment . . . ." If the Devil had known his grandmother, Gomes observes, he no doubt would have "quoted her words with pleasure when in her response to her physician who told her to go on a diet said, 'Better to die from havin' it than from wantin' it.'" (*Sermons*, p. 51).

The Devil attempts to shake Jesus' trust in God and dependence on God's grace and providence by coming at the three most basic human needs: survival, power and identity.

If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread, jump off the Temple, take power. That is, don't rely on God; you can do better; you can do more on your own.

That, Christian faith maintains, is what is wrong with us and with the human condition. At the heart of things, we aren't willing to trust God. We aren't willing to care for the garden and for one another. We aren't willing to be who God created us to be and to live up to God's expectations—a denial of our birthright.

Frederick Buchener says sin is a centrifugal; it pushes everything out and away from the center of our being, even God, until there's nothing there but self. Sin is finally selfishness, self-centeredness, hubris, pride; that secret sense that I, truly, am the center of the universe: Me, Mine, My nation, My religion, My tribe, My race, My clan, ME.

The human ego, unrestrained, is a marvel. Plantinga cites a personal ad in *New York Magazine* by a woman who described herself as "strikingly beautiful, perceptive, elegant, bright, articulate, original in

mind, unique in spirit. I possess a rare balance of beauty and depth," he asks how could anyone measure up enough to that to love her? Worship is more appropriate.

Winston Churchill, one of the truly great men of our century, said that his idea of a good dinner was to dine well and discuss a good topic, with himself as the chief conversationalist. Churchill admired his own speeches so much that he would lie in bed listening to recordings of them. Once, he and his valet had words. Afterward, Churchill rumbled, "You were rude." His valet responded, "You were rude, too." Churchill pouted. After a minute he said, "But, I am a great man."

Douglas MacArthur, Commander of American Forces in the Pacific in World War II, was a remarkable soldier and military leader, who "used fifteen-foot mirrors to heighten his image and came to speak of himself in the third person." (See Plantinga, p. 84-86).

Those examples are extreme. The sin you and I need to acknowledge, I believe, is both thinking too highly of ourselves, using others for our selfish ends—material, emotional, vocational, political, sexual, personal—and not thinking nearly highly enough—not being willing to be responsible for our own lives and the life of our communities. Our sin is a denial of who we are—God's children, beloved, cared for, living in a garden that will sustain us if we care for it and in community where life will be good and safe and full and rich if we live as children of God.

But we don't, and, ironically, even our religion is capable of becoming a vehicle of sin. Sometimes even our religion reflects the dislocation, the denial, and becomes part of the problem instead of the solution.

Moral philosophy can get depressing at this point, cynical even. "Who can deliver us from this body of death?" St. Paul lamented. And at this point in the conversation, Christian faith says the most amazing thing: what we cannot do on our own, God does for us. Faith suggests that God makes it right.

In a wonderful essay she titled, "Sinner, Wretch, and Reprobate," Kathleen Norris reclaimed for me a word that makes me uncomfortable, "wretch." It's in the hymn, "Amazing Grace . . . that saved a wretch like me." It's so negative, some newer hymnals have replaced it. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved someone like me." We've moralized that word, too, and made it sound perverse, filthy. But wretch originally meant someone who is lost, banished, in exile, a wanderer looking for home, someone who knows that there is a better place to be but can't go there on his or her own."

Norris wrote:

> "Maybe there is someone who only thinks of good things in the middle of the night, who never lies awake regretting the selfish, nigh unforgivable, things that he or she has done. Maybe the unconscious of some people does tell them they are OK all the time. But, I wonder. I suspect that anyone who has not experienced wretchedness, exile, wandering, loss, misery, whether inwardly or in outward circumstance, has a superficial grasp of what it means to be human." (*Amazing Grace*, p. 166).

I suspect that each of us, to some degree or another, at some level of integrity, known perhaps to no one but ourselves, knows about wretchedness—as lostness, exile, homesickness.

I suspect that each of us knows about some kind of dishonesty and unfaithfulness and betrayal.

I suspect that deep in that core of integrity which is our spirit, we know God's absence and long for God's presence.

Lent is the time when we think about all of that; when we ponder God's amazing grace, God's love and patience, God's coming to us all the way to the cross to bridge the gap, to offer forgiveness, to put back together what has come apart, to bring us back home where we belong.

Lent—a time to reflect, a time to engage in self-examination and confession, and a time to express gratitude that somehow, in the mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ, somehow, in spite of everything,

> "There is a balm in Gilead
> to make the wounded whole.
> . . . a balm in Gilead
> to heal the sin-sick soul."

Amen.